



[Tower of Babel](#)

Languages, Introduction

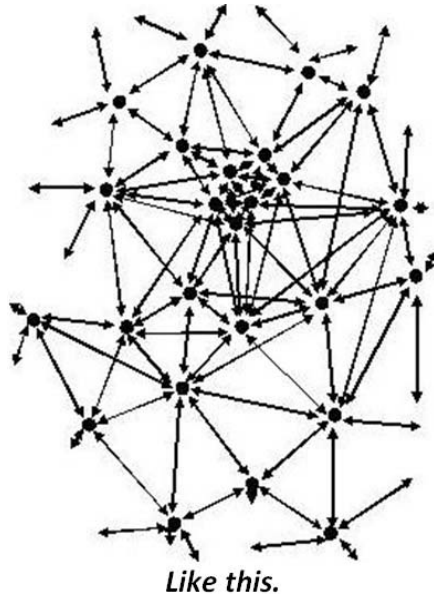
Each language is a work of art, as priceless as any work of art that can be imagined.

All languages are part of the general human heritage.

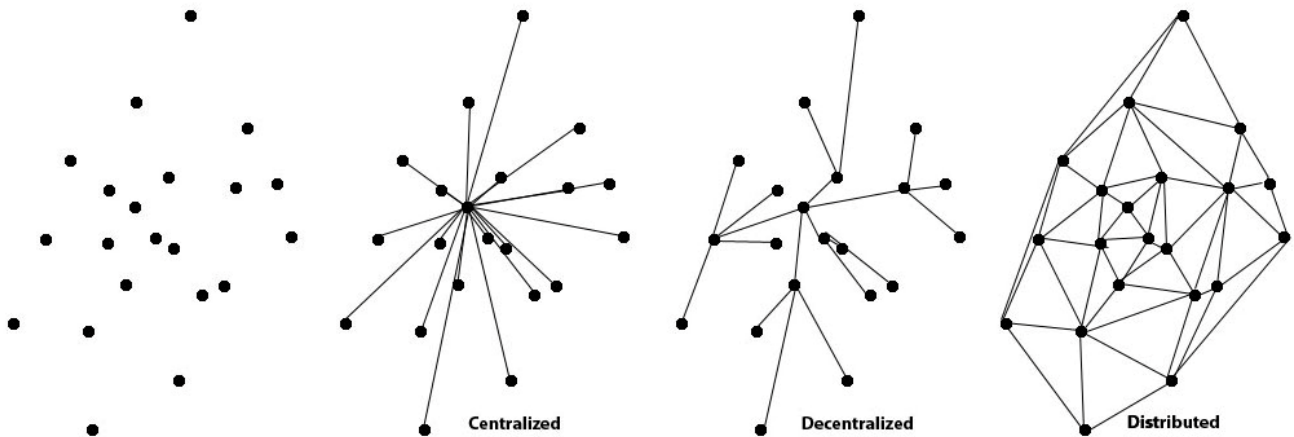
Languages are kept alive by the speakers and the writers of the language. Each language is a collaborative project of People's Power. There is no centre and no hierarchy. Language authority rests with the ordinary speakers.

Each language is produced (and constantly reproduced) in a form of organisation that is nowadays called a "distributed network" (See [Ron Press, New tools for Marxists, 1994](#)). It can

be imagined as a diagram:



And as a progression, like this:



Creation of language is a real-life, on-going example of the kind of mode of production that can supersede the capitalist mode of production. The work is its own reward. The artefact produced is beyond price, and it belongs to all. It at once becomes a common patrimony.

Creation of language happens in real life. The creation of the language and the use of the language are one and the same thing. Hence language is an example of the kind of communistic mode of production that can supersede the capitalist mode of

production. The work is its own reward. The artefact that is produced – language – belongs to all.

The many languages of the world are open gateways. They are not barriers.

Learning languages teaches the learner how to understand people, in more ways than just understanding what they are saying when they talk to you. Far from being a “confusion of tongues”, as in the Babel-myth (see illustration), the many languages are all open ways to understanding.

Languages that are spoken by large numbers of Africans, in different countries on our continent are: Kiswahili, French, English, Arabic and Portuguese. Of these, only Kiswahili is a purely African language. Across the continent, translation of an African language into another African language is often done via a European language, and this is a problem.

Because there is no central authority, a dictionary is only a collection and a record of words as they are used. But dictionaries – single-language dictionaries – make a language stronger.

In South Africa there are eleven official languages. Most of them are not well served with dictionaries, or with the publication of written literature.

The upward mobility of people that has followed upon our South African democratic breakthrough has resulted in a flight to

English in particular, as the most extensive language in the country, and as people think, in the world. This is a problem.

But it remains the case that all of our official languages are spoken languages, and all of them are the first, or home, language of significant numbers of South Africans.

African children, like children everywhere, need to be taught, in the first years of their schooling, in the language that they know from home. Later, they need to be taught their own language as a subject, like other subjects. South Africa has a programme to achieve these aims, gradually.

African languages, like all other languages, need writers to write them, and readers to read them. In our South African circumstances, these are revolutionary, nation-building tasks. We build our nation by giving life to our heritage.

This CU Course on Languages

This ten-part course will attempt something that hardly exists in South Africa, which is a critique of language use, and language policy, in the country today.

This is a political education course, and it is one of the sixteen CU ten-part courses.

The course will interrogate, and critique, the 11-official-language policy. We will ask if in practice this policy is working as a cover and a blanket under which the nine official African languages are

being allowed to fall into greater disrepair. In this regard, we will look at [PANSALB](#), [Kha Ri Gude](#) and any other institutions and programmes of this kind that may come to our attention.

We will then propose ways in which language – an institution without a state – can be strengthened with the communist means that we have at our own disposal: Education, Organisation and Mobilisation. Language, as we have seen, is generated communistically. It should be possible to repair and regenerate the same languages communistically.

Hence we will look at the possibility of creating dictionaries by “crowd-sourcing”, using wikis.

And we will look at the possible application of Freirean pedagogical methods for the co-operative learning of languages in study circles, because languages are social, and we think they should be taught socially, as a community of practice, and not as commodified, “qualified” products.

- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).